

311027Z Oct 05

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TAIPEI 004403

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/28/2015

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SUBJECT: PRE-ELECTION SCENE SETTER: TAIPEI COUNTY

Classified By: AIT Director Douglas Paal, Reasons: 1.4 (B/D)

¶1. (C) Summary: The ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and opposition Kuomintang (KMT) both view Taipei County as the most important contest in the December 3 local elections and a key indicator of relative party strength following the KMT's election of Taipei City Mayor Ma Ying-jeou as its new Chairman and a series of scandals involving the DPP. Both parties expect a tight race that will go down to the wire despite opinion polls that show the KMT's Chou Hsi-wei with a substantial and growing lead over the DPP's Luo Wen-jia. The KMT's campaign strategy is to turn the election into a referendum on public dissatisfaction with the DPP central government's performance, while Luo Wen-jia will campaign on his personal record and image as a reformer and try to minimize his personal connections to President Chen. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) The contest for Taipei County Magistrate is widely viewed here as the most important race in the December 3 local elections. It is also viewed as a key test of strength between the ruling Demographic Progressive Party (DPP) and the opposition Kuomintang (KMT) in the run up to the presidential election in 2008, when the DPP expects to face a formidable foe: the highly popular Taipei City Mayor and new KMT Chairman Ma Ying-jeou. Taipei County is the largest local jurisdiction in Taiwan, with 3.7 million people, and its population, mostly migrants from throughout Taiwan, reflects the demographics of the island as a whole. Although Blue supporters outnumber Green supporters in Taipei County by a small margin, the local government has been in DPP hands since 1989. The DPP is deeply concerned that the charges of scandals and poor government performance swirling around President Chen Shui-bian and the central government may cost them the election in Taipei County,

¶3. (C) Acting Magistrate Lin Hsi-yao is filling in temporarily after the popular Su Tseng-chang stepped down as Taipei County Magistrate when he assumed the post of Presidential Office Secretary General in May 2004, before becoming DPP chairman last January. Some AIT contacts suggest that Su will have to step down as party chairman if the DPP loses Taipei County and that this will end Su's prospects to compete for the DPP presidential nomination. Other contacts suggest, however, that Su will stay on as party chairman if the margin of defeat in Taipei County is close. (In any event, Su has not impressed us as a quitter.)

¶4. (SBU) The DPP has selected Luo Wen-jia, a rising political star but an outsider to Taipei County politics, to run for magistrate. Luo, who has long been closely associated with Chen Shui-bian, stepped down as Chairman of the Hakka Affairs Commission last March after having been a legislator from the Northern District of Taipei City. Luo's opponent is Chou Hsi-wei, who has been a legislator representing Taipei County's First District since 1998. A member of the People First Party (PFP) from 2000-2005, Chou returned to the KMT last April to compete as the KMT nominee for Taipei County Magistrate. Although recently published public opinion polls show Chou with a substantial lead of seven to fifteen percentage points, there is a large number of undecided voters, and both the KMT and DPP expect a tight race. While our contacts give a decided edge to Luo over Chou in campaign skills and personal charisma, the DPP corruption issue hurts Luo despite his own reputation as a reformer.

¶5. (C) Luo Wen-jia told the Acting Director on October 26 that current internal polling by the DPP indicates that Chou Hsi-wei is running 3-4 percent ahead of him in voting preference, but that Luo is 3-4 percent more popular with the public than Chou. Luo attributes this discrepancy to public dissatisfaction with the DPP central government over corruption and poor performance. This factor has a particularly strong effect in Taipei County because of its proximity to the capital. Luo said that his campaign strategy is to focus on his popularity and image as a reformer, his record, and his political message, which includes a call for reform by all parties, and that he hopes to have a chance to present his message in one or two televised debates with Chou. Luo noted that 51 percent of

respondents to a DPP internal poll believe he is a reformer, exceeding the 37 percent who regard the DPP as a reform party. Luo believes that the swing voters in Taipei County support the Green side and his reform efforts and that a high voter turnout will help the DPP. Swing voters are relatively apathetic, however, Luo said, so one goal is to mobilize this group to vote for him. Luo is also counting on winning half of the Hakka vote, which traditionally goes to the KMT. Luo said he was not sure whether the October 29 visit to Taipei County by the embattled President Chen would have a positive or negative effect on his campaign, and he noted that the strong rhetoric on cross-Straits issues that Chen used to mobilize his base did not appeal to swing voters in Taipei County. (Note: During his October 29 campaign stop, President Chen apologized to the public for a major scandal and reversed his previous position by expressing support for Luo's reform initiative, the New DPP Movement, according to press reports. End Note.)

16. (C) During a discussion with AIT on October 26, KMT Taipei County Deputy Chairman Chao Jung-sheng attributed Chou Hsi-wei's rise in the polls to the DPP corruption image, the "Ma Ying-jeou effect" (including frequent campaign visits by Ma), and the efforts of the KMT organization in arranging Chou's campaign schedule throughout the large and diverse county. In the end, Chao predicted, the election will be a showdown between the Green and Blue forces. Current polls showing Chou with a wide lead do not reflect how close the race will be, Chao stressed. In Taipei County, base support for blue and green is about equal, but, according to Chao, swing voters shade to the blue, because they are opposed to the DPP's confrontational image and because intellectuals focus on the DPP poor governance record. High voter turnout will help the Blue, Chao suggested. Although being a mainlander is a disadvantage for Chou Hsi-wei, Luo Wen-jia may not be able to play the "ethnic card" (Taiwanese versus mainlander). This is because Luo is from the Hakka minority rather than the majority southern Fukienese, who do not always get along with the Hakka.

Comment

17. (C) The Taipei County Magistrate race remains the most visible contest in this election. It has also become a dramatic reminder of the waning fortunes of the scandal plagued DPP and the rise of Ma Ying-jeou's new-look KMT. All observers acknowledge that Luo is a better candidate individually than Chou, but an increasing number expect that the negative image of the DPP and President Chen may lose this close race for the DPP.

PAAL